

February 12, 2023 – Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
The Letter *And* the Spirit of the Law
Gospel of Matthew 5:17-37
Fr. John

The gospel for today has a rather harsh tone to it, to put it mildly. The words coming out of Jesus' mouth are very demanding and indeed set a very high moral standard. Not only must one abstain from acts of murder, violence, vengeance, dishonesty, and lust but we must not even have these thoughts enter our minds.

We might ask - who can walk such a narrow and demanding moral path? Indeed if religion were only a set of moral laws and precepts, it would be devoid of any empathy, compassion, and that which lies at the basis of all human needs - that of loving and being loved.

Unfortunately religious belief has often been expressed and experienced only in that legal manner and has driven many away from the Church.

Does that mean that the Mosaic Law based on the 10 Commandments and Jesus' strong endorsement of them are to be ignored?

Well first of all, we need to take a closer look at the purpose of 'law'. Does it make sense? Does it give good direction for human life and ultimately lead to good order, harmony, and right relationships?

I think we can all agree that we need the guidelines of law to avoid total chaos in human society. But the real issue is the **manner in which the law is received and applied**. That's when the spirit of the law and the letter of the law come into play. An example of that which we have seen recently is the fatal beating of a black youth by Memphis police officers, supposedly upholding the law. Conversely, in Saturday's Leader-Post the article on Joe Roberts, a motivational speaker whose life was turned around by a caring police officer.

The whole ministry of Jesus was to model what it means to be **fully human** as the Creator desired us to be. The scriptures tell us that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and that's what He desires for us as well. But because we have also been gifted with free will we don't always make choices that give evidence of that Spirit. And that is where the offer of love, compassion, and forgiveness is given to us.

So it's not a matter of merely being obedient to law which can be cold and sterile, but rather responding to the love and forgiveness of God which impels us to make the purpose of law embrace our hearts. And that comes only with building relationships. These kinds of relationships cannot be institutionalized. Unfortunately that's the direction where the Church has often gone in the past. Many survivors of Church-run Indigenous residential schools in our country can attest to that.

The virtue of obedience to law can only be fostered by building a relationship that is based on **trust and love**. That's when it genuinely comes from the heart. And that is the perspective where Jesus is coming from in his teaching on the law and that's what he came to fulfil until it is accomplished in the hearts of all people.

Perhaps the letter to the Corinthians sums this up quite well. 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him. These things, God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything - even the depths of God.'